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REIMAGINING THE BUDDHA

THE FIGURE OF SHAKYAMUNI IN THE NIZARI ISMAILI TRADITION OF SOUTH ASIA

The life, miracles and preaching of Siddhartha Gautama, the historical Buddha, have left such a deep imprint on South-Asian culture that, even after the quasi disappearance of Buddhism from the Indian Subcontinent, its influence has continuously, been felt at various levels. Shrouded in legends, the figure of Shakyamuni could easily, in the course of time, be reconstructed and interpreted by different Buddhist schools. Later on it was even incorporated into the mythological framework of Brahmanical Hinduism. One can surmise that, owing to his immense popularity, the figure of Buddha could not be altogether ignored. His life and achievements had to be taken into account by non-Buddhists, whether to be reviled or praised. According to Kane (1941:720–723), a specific cult of the Buddha image had developed among the higher Brahmanical castes. Between the seventh and eleventh centuries, the founder of the *śākyadharma,* as Buddhism was sometimes referred to, started to be regarded as one of the 10 principal avatars of Vishnu. Thus, at a time when Buddhism was nearly extinct in India the worship of Shakyamuni started to play a part, albeit minor, in the Hindu Brahmanical tradition.

Much less known is the fact that the figure of Buddha has also inspired the preachers of a particular Muslim tradition represented by the Nizari Ismailis of South Asia who had started to spread their religion among the local population from the twelfth century onward, mainly under the name of Satpanth or "the true path". Without entering into details (for which we refer the reader to the various publications on Ismailism mentioned in the references), it may be recalled that this sect of Shia Islam spread in South Asia in a highly acculturated form which originated from various complex factors,

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The life, miracles and preaching of Siddhartha Gautama, the historical Buddha, have left such a deep imprint on South-Asian culture that, even after the quasi disappearance of Buddhism from the Indian Subcontinent, its influence has continuously, been felt at various levels. Shrouded in legends, the figure of Shakyamuni could easily, in the course of time, be reconstructed and interpreted by different Buddhist schools. Later on it was even incorporated into the mythological framework of Brahmanical Hinduism. One can surmise that, owing to his immense popularity, the figure of Buddha could not be altogether ignored. His life and achievements had to be taken into account by non-Buddhists, whether to be reviled or praised. According to Kane (1941:720–723), a specific cult of the Buddha image had developed among the higher Brahmanical castes. Between the seventh and eleventh centuries, the founder of the *śākyadharma,* as Buddhism was sometimes referred to, started to be regarded as one of the 10 principal avatars of Vishnu. Thus, at a time when Buddhism was nearly extinct in India the worship of Shakyamuni started to play a part, albeit minor, in the Hindu Brahmanical tradition.

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such as the necessity of concealing one's true faith to avoid persection (*taqiyya*),[1] as well as from a particular strategy of conversion, but also coincided with the philosophical doctrine of Ismailism, perceived as the final culmination and fulfillment of all great world religions.

A study of the Nizari literature of the Subcontinent (Nanji, 1978; Allana, 1984; Shackle and Moir, 1992; Kassam, 1995; Asani, 2002; Esmail, 2002) broadly known as *ginān*s, shows that the systematic use of Indic terminologies and concepts is one of its main characteristics. Hindu references – which are the most frequent – are not merely given as a suggestive parallel aimed at smoothing the path of the new convert, who can thus easily achieve the transition from one religion to the other; they also seek to convey an esoteric message. Hindu mythology, far from being discarded, had been integrated and myths perceived as containing, albeit in a cryptic form, the revelation of Ismaili hiero- or -meta-history which was to be decoded for the benefit of the devotees. Similarly, long before Ismailism had spread to the Subcontinent, Biblical heroes had been included into its cosmological and metaphysicial doctrine. This was done in a way which went far beyond the litteral Quranic interpretation of these sacred figures as prophets preceding the advent of Muhammad.

Actually early (mainly Fatimid) Ismailism had already developed a distinct and elaborate doctrine concerning the role of the pre-Islamic prophets, whilst it gave birth to a particular version of Shia imamology. As Daftary explains, it was believed that 'the hierohistory of mankind is consumated in seven eras of various durations, each one inaugurated by a speaker-prophet or enunciator (*nātiq*) of a revealed message, which in its esoteric aspect contains a religious law (*sharī'a*). In the first six eras of human history, the *nātiqs* (or *nutaqā*), also known as *ūlul'l-azm* or the prophets "with resolution", had been Adam, Nuh (Noah), Ibrahim (Abraham), Musa (Moses), Isa (Jesus) and Muhammad ... Projecting into the past their current theories, the early Ismailis further believed that each of the first six *nātiqs* was succeeded by a spiritual legatee or executor (*waṣī*), also called a foundation (*asās*) or silent one (*ṣāmit*), who interpreted the inner, esoteric (*bātin*) meaning of the revealed messages to the elite. In the first six eras, Shith (Seth), Sam (Shem), Isma'il (Ishmael), Harun

[1] In Shia religious practise *taqiyya* is the precautionary dissimulation of one's true faith for fear of persecution (Daftary, 1990: 566). In the South-Asian context it meant hiding from the Medieval Sunni rulers who had nearly always persecuted the followers of "extremist" Shia sects. Ismailis resorted to this method as a form of political and social radicalism.

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(Aaron), Yusha' (Joshua), Sham'un al-Safa (Simon Peter), and Ali had been such legatees. Each *wasi, asās* or *ṣāmit* was, in turn, followed by seven imams called *atimmā'* (singular, *mutimm,* completer), who guarded the true meaning of the scriptures and the laws both in both their *zāhir* and *bātin* aspects' (Daftary, 1990: 139).

These theories and their subsequent developments[2] were later incorporated, with a few modifications, into the Nizari Ismaili doctrine which first flourished in Iran and other countries such as Syria (Ibid.: 395–396 and Marquet, 1985: 231–233). It must be added that the figure of the Imam has always been central to Twelver Shia and Ismaili doctrines, whilst in the later one – in particular in the Nizari religion where its role became even more important than that of the Prophet – it acquired a very specific status as a manifestation of the Universal Human Soul or Divine Light.

The vision of the sacred revelation which emerged from Ismaili philosophy was therefore very different from Sunni legalistic and literal interpretations of the Quran. But in many respects it was akin to the ideas of some Sufi philosophers such as Suhrawardi and Ibn Arabi (twelfth-thirteenth centuries): some Sufi Sunnis, like Ismailis, had been deeply influenced by gnostic and neo-platonistic theories. It is also noteworthy that in the Manicheian gnosis (third century A.D.) not only Adam, Noah and others but Buddha himself was integrated in the series of Prophets (Tardieu, 1981).[3]

Besides, the striking analogies which existed between the Ismaili beliefs about cyclic time and the theory of cosmic eras (*kalpas* and *yugas*) in Hinduism may have encouraged the Nizari preachers to resort to Indic patterns which were already familiar to the new converts. It was thus easier for them to understand the tenets of the 'true religion' (*satpanth*). A new, revised, version of *kalpas* and *yugas* was therefore introduced into Ismaili devotional literature with the mention of numerous avatars, some of which were, at least by name,

[2] The limited number of cycles was replaced by a greater endless series of cycles (Daftary, 1990: 140).

[3] See also Corbin (1994: 178, 183). Interestingly, on page 251, Corbin mentions those passages of Surhawardi's work where the thirteenth century Iranian Sufi refers to the doctrines of "Bodhasaf" (Bodhisattva, Buddha) and of the Oriental theosophists. These passages were commented on by the seventeenth century Iranian Sufi Molla Sadra Shirazi.

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identical with the Hindu ones.[4] In this way (and it must be specified, in conformity with the Ismaili revelation which is said to have always existed, albeit in a hidden form), in our cosmic Era, Vishnu's ten incarnations (*avatārs*) were accepted as being former manifestations or epiphanies (*mahzars*) of the Imam. As Shackle and Moir (1992: 157) have remarked, 'In the search for effective means to convey the Ismaili conception of the Imamate to an Indian audience, the Mission adapted the well known Vaishnava theme of ten divine manifestations (*das avatār*)... so as to include Imam Ali as the tenth and last manifestation...'.

Before going further, one should also try to understand the differences that exist between the Indic perception of Divine *avatārs* and the Islamic concept of *mahzar*. There has been much debate and controversy among scholars of Ismailism on this subject. Obviously, the Ismaili *avatārs* do not convey the same philosophical message as the original Vaishnava models from which they take inspiration: to understand this one must, before all, remember that the Nizari preachers, while seeking Indic equivalences or resorting to indigenous patterns, did not lose sight of their own trends of thoughts: the local models were never accepted as such, en bloc, but carefully re-worked into something different that belonged to the specific world of the Nizari religion. A close examination of the relevant Ismaili texts reveals that the word *avatār* meant 'manifestation' rather than 'incarnation'; but even the Hindu concept of *avatār* is far from being equivalent to the Christian notion of incarnation. The idea of God's 'descents' may be closer to the Islamic *mahzar* than the Christian dogma of the 'word made flesh' As Esmail (2002: 27) has written: the Ismaili avatar is, in a sense, like 'the god created in the faiths' as explained by Henry Corbin.[5] At the popular level, and at a deeper philosophical level, it is the esoteric idea of Divine epiphany that accounts for its dual aspect: the earthly reality of a material body, (which is also the symbol of a higher, heavenly, angelic figure existing in the *ālam al-mithāl or* mundus imaginalis) being one of the many

[4] These lists are to be found in the ritual texts referred to as *dua* and *gavantri* (*gayatri*) attributed to Pir Sadruddin or Sayyid Imam Shah, texts which have been discarded recently from the official prayers of the Agakhani Khojas. This was meant to be recited as a sacred genealogy of the Imams and Pirs. The new Nizari *dua* has now only reference to the line of Imams from Ali onwards, whereas the Imamshahi sect of Gujarat (an offshoot of the Nizari religion) has retained the series of Hindu avatars.

[5] See Corbin (1958) passim.

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forms of God who otherwise remains invisible and inconceivable in his pure essence.

At this stage, it is important to specify that although the 10 avatars play a prominent role in the Satpanth, the cosmic cycles and the Divine manifestations equated to Hindu *avatārs* are conceived in a distinct way that is not found in the Hindu tradition. For instance four great cosmic cycles are mentioned. Replacing, so to say, the *kalpas* of Sanskrit literature, they are referred to as *kalaf*. Each *kalaf* respectively called *Jayalā*, *Fāyalā*, *Arjalā* and *Khalīfā*, is divided into yugas. While the first *kalafs* have a varying number of *yugas,* the last one comprises the four well known *yugas* of Hindu tradition[6] and it is in this *kalaf* that God's ten avatars are related to the figure of Vishnu. Whatever is said of the first *kalaf,* however is a mere sequence of names that are intended to be read like a genealogy of the Imams since the creation of the world.[7] For instance, in the first *kalaf*:

nīl se anīl, anīl se, sūn, sūn se, sān, sān se gyān, gyān se nūr, nūr se tej, tej se jal, jal se kamal, kamal se kadam.

Literally: from Nil was born Anil, from Anil, Sun, from Sun, San. etc..

But if we realize that these are not real persons in the material sense, but rather what a Cartesian mind would called 'abstractions', symbols or archetypes, the sequence can be translated as follows: from the 'blue' (darkness?) was born the 'non-blue', from the non-blue the void (*sun* is a vernacular form of the Sanskrit *śunya*) and from the void, majesty (*śana*),[8] from majesty knowledge; from knowledge, light; from light, brightness; from brightness, water; from

[6] These cycles and manifestations are listed in the former Nizari *dua,* and in some other texts belonging to the Khoja and lmamshahi traditions.

[7] Quite interestingly, after the assertion that the only existing Being, God, was *nirākār* (formless) the initial list contains exclusively negations: for example, there was no sound, nothing created, no Omkar (the sacred syllable *Om*), no death, not even darkness… So the universe was created in the following way: There was a kind of 'blueness' and 'fogginess' (*nilvarṇ, dhandhukār*) and in the middle of it the Omkar. This Omkar 'produced' *Prem* (love) and from love, water (*jal*) was created, and so forth.

[8] The meaning of the word *sān* or *śān* is not clear. Actually there are many variants of the same list. Here *san* seems a logical sequel of *sūn,* as in the word *sūnsān,* empty, deserted place, wilderness.

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water, lotus; from lotus, step ...[9] The fact that these 'archetypes' do not essentially differ from the later Divine manifestations as names and/or persons, is in conformity with the Gnostic concepts exposed in various Ismaili cosmologies.[10] However, certain aspects of the Satpanthi *duas* lack both in accuracy and philosophical depth and appear to be popular imitations of more sophisticated literary models.

Let us revert to these divine genealogies. In the subsequent eras, the 'archetypical' names merge with other divine names, such as Hav, Kav, Tatv etc (not found in the Hindu tradition) and in the fourth *kalaf* with Vishnu's successive incarnations. It is therefore by borrowing from the Brahmanical literature, rather than from the various Buddhist traditions, that the Ismaili figure of Buddha has been created and integrated into the Nizari literature of the Subcontinent. As in the Hindu classical series, he is also the ninth descent of Vishnu, who has been equated to Ali and to all the Imams before and after him. But the originality of the 'Ismailized' avatars lies in the fact that their family genealogies are given in detail and that they are made to descend one from the other, Buddha becoming thus a descendant of Krishna. This implies, of course, that there are minor 'avatars' between the ten main ones.

Another question arises: does it mean that by sticking to the Vaishnava model, the Ismailis had completely lost sight of direct, 'original' Buddhist references? This issue will have to be examined further.

At this juncture, it is necessary to say a few words about the Satpanthi texts describing the ten *avatārs*. Apart from the lists mentioned above (found in the ritual texts called *duas* and *gayantrīs*)

[9] It is interesting to remark here that the famous nineteenth century Indian mystic, Shirdi Sai Baba is said to have recited a similar 'genealogy' comprising these names, apart from the ten avatars. In her fascinating study entitled *Unravelling the Enigma,* 1999, pp.176–177, M. Warren rightly compares the latter to the avatars found in Nizari Ismaili Khoja texts. However, on pages 284–285, she fails to see that Sai Baba's words quoted in Abdul's manuscript, such as "From Needa Aneeda, from Aneeda, Shunya, from Shunya, Shana" etc. correspond - with very view differences - to the same words as listed in the Nizari and Imamshahi genealogies reproduced in the *duas*. This is certainly not a coincidence: Sai Baba's Ismaili connections should be explored as they may be related to the tradition of the Nizari preacher Shah Tahir (see Ivanow, 1998) or the Sayyidkhani line of the Imamshahi main branch. I have started some research on this subject with the help of Zawahir Moir, whom I thank for this invaluable information.

[10] For these cosmologies see for instance, Daftary (1996: 75–90) and Corbin (1983, 30–47).

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there are short *gināns* dealing exclusively with the ten manifestations of the Imam as Vishnu and longer compositions referred to as *Das Avatār* in which the Buddha incarnation is described in some detail; for example, in the version attributed to Pir Sadruddin (one page) or in the *ginān* ascribed to Sayyid Imam Shah which has 260 verses. Along with these texts South Asian Nizari literature (whether Agakhani or Imamshahi) also includes entire poems devoted only to the Buddha: *Moto Buddha Avatār* (1030 verses) which bears the signature (*chāp*) of Imam Shah and a *Buddh Avatar* in 522 verses ascribed to Pir Sadruddin; There is also the lengthy *Pandvon no Parab* (The Pandavas' feast).

THE SATPANTHI STORY OF BUDDHA

We will now proceed to the story of the ninth incarnation as retold in Sadruddin's and Imam Shah's longer *gināns* which do not substantially differ in content At first glance the reader is under the impression that the Ismaili Buddha is an entirely original creation which apparently owes very little, if not anything at all, to the Hindu or Buddhist versions. And indeed the character, the setting, as well as the time in which Buddha manifests himself greatly depart from what is described in ancient and medieval Indian (Hindu or Buddhist) literature. It is only by going deeper into the subject that one can trace the existence of some subtle links with the indigenous traditions.

In fact, the story of the Ismaili Buddha could be viewed as an original sequel to the Mahabharata. The extreme popularity of the pan-Indian Epic, in its Sanskrit as well as in its vernacular oral and written versions, had already prompted the Nizari missionaries to integrate its main characters into their grand hiero-historical vision: Krishna was, of course, a manifestation of the Imam in the *dvāpara yuga*, whilst the Pandavas, Kunti and Draupadi were the crypto-Ismaili devotees, the elder brother Yudhishtira becoming the *mukhi* (leader of the Nizari community or *jamāt*) who will save with himself nine crores of souls.[11]

In the Nizari narration the battle of the Mahabharata has just been fought and the Pandavas feel much remorse at having killed their cousins the Kauravas. Krishna (the Imam) had explained to them

[11] For the series of souls saved during the different yugas by Vishnu's (the Imam's) avatar, see for example Shackle and Moir: 170.

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that the war could not be avoided, after all his attempts and offers for peace, and that, consequently, they had only done their duty and could not be considered as guilty. Instead, the Pandavas, wishing to expiate their crime follow the Brahmins who advise them to organise a huge sacrifice (*yagya,* skt. *yajna*) so that their sins could be forgiven. While they are making the necessary preparations the *dvāpar yuga* abruptly comes to an end while God (Vishnu) gives up his eighth incarnation as Krishna. He then assumes a new avatar as Buddha and appears at the gate of the Pandavas' palace which was guarded by Bhima. He has a very strange appearance: apart from posing as religious mendicant, he looks like a warrior, donning a Muslim dress. In some *ginān*s he is described as "Mughal"(*muglāī*),"Persian"(*farsī*) and *mleccha*. Besides he is a *caṇḍāla* (the old Sanskrit term referring to untouchables) and a leper, from whose body emanates an unbearable odour.

Since the Brahman astrologers had predicted the coming of a *caṇḍāla* who would try to penetrate forcibly into the sacred area prepared for the sacrifice and pollute it, Bhima attempts to drive him away. Consequently, the visitor, who wished to see Yudhishtira after having heard about the sacrifice, is not allowed into the palace. However, he refuses to move and starts a long lecture in which he reveals his true personality as Buddha and delivers his spiritual message. The Pandavas hesitate, surprised to hear these "ambrosial" words (*amṛ̊tvāṇī*) from the mouth of such an impure visitor. The core of his teaching concerns "the true nature of castes": a *caṇḍāla* is not, as Brahmins usually think, a man born in a particular caste. Actually, in the *kali yuga,* among the Brahmins themselves are many *caṇḍālas:* all those who read the old "vain" *Vedas* just to fill their stomachs, are ignorant and full of cunning; if they go to the sacred places of pilgrimage, worshipping water and stones it means they are *caṇḍāla*. Actually, those who ignore the new and real *Veda* of our Era, the *Athar*(*va*) *Veda* are the true *caṇḍālas*.

In the South-Asian Nizari tradition this *Veda* referred to as *Atharva* or sometimes as *Athar Veda* is viewed as the secret fourth or the fifth Veda; it is the "Hinduized" symbol of the esoteric Quran revealed in the sacred ginanic literature. Buddha's discourse goes on with the description of those who are the real *caṇḍālas* among the other two high *varṇas,* among human beings in general, women and animals. Characteristic of the *caṇḍālas,* says the ninth *avatār*, are pride, violence, cruelty, deception and other similar vices. Similarly, all those who having embraced the true path (Satpanth, the South Asian name

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of Ismaili religion), do not go to the regular assembly of the faithful (*jamāt-khana*) to perform the Nizari *ghaṭ-pāṭ* ritual and refuse to pay the obligatory tithe (*dasondh*) are deemed *caṇḍālas*. On hearing these words Bhima asks Buddha: "Who is supreme in this world among men and women?". This is followed by an enumeration of various virtues, such as compassion, forgiveness, capacity to control the five senses, respect of mother and father and of the duties of the faithful (the followers of the Satpanth): regular attendance of the *gat* (ritual assembly), singing of *Hari bhajan* (here the *ginān*s), meditation (*dhyān*) and respect of the forty (good) actions (*kiriy*ā).[12] Subsequently, the Lord proceeds to the description of the behaviour of the *varṇas* in *Kali yuga:* in the present era the Brahmins will not follow the *dharma* any longer, they will give us the practise of *Vedas* and do the service of the Shudras; the Kshatryas will act contrary to their *svadharama*, the *mahajans* (Vaishyas) will be dishonest, selfish and violent.

The fragment which follows (quite lengthy in the Imamshahi longer version) is a description of the evils and abnomalities of the *kali yuga,* very much similar in style to the prophetic *ginān*s and *bhajans* which constitute a particular genre of Ismaili poetry (Khan, 1997b; Khan and Moir, 2000). In this era nobody will have the knowlege of Vedas, Shastras and Puranas, men will become adults at 12 years of age, women will bear children when they are nine…

Afterwards Buddha tells Bhima to go to his eldest brother and explain than his sacrifice is useless: the Pandavas' sins will not be forgiven, whereas the blessed vision (*didār*) of the Lord is worth more than an infinity of *yagyas*. Bhim goes to see Yudhishtira and reports to him what he has seen and heard and the message which he has been told to convey. Surprised and still hesitating, the king decides to ask his brother Sahadeva, who is a brilliant astrologer. By observing the stars and making various calculations Sahadeva understands that Shri Krishna himself has come in the form of Buddha. If his brothers do not listen to him they will regret it. Obviously, the Brahmins have

[12] A reference to the Nizari manual of conduct which is mainly represented by a *ginān* called *So kiriya* (hundred good actions); as the author of the French translation of Sadruddin's *Buddha Avatar* remarks, there is indeed a kind of break after the fortieth principle. On the *So Kiriya* and their Imamsahi variant the *Shiksha Patri*, see Shackle and Moir (1992: 145–147). Although it is sometimes surmised that the Imamshahi text inspired the Khoja one, being prior to it, one must bear in mind the existence of a Sanskrit poem listing hundred good deeds, by the eleventh century poet Kshemendra, the *Charucharyashataka*. As we will see the analogy may not be fortuitous when mention will made of another composition of the same author on the 10 avatars.

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been telling lies. The Pandavas decide to welcome the visitor, but the Hindu priests are horrified. If the warriors persist in their intention to see the *caṇḍāla* they must, at least, take certain precautionary measures. The five brothers agree to sprinkle the earth with Ganges water and raise seven black curtains to protect them from ritual pollution. But when the Lord is admitted into the sacred area the curtains fall by themselves and Yudhishtira and his brothers understand that he is indeed a Divine manifestation. Buddha explains that their sacrifice is useless; the Brahmins have suggested they perform this ritual with the sole purpose of filling their own stomach. As the *kali yuga* has come, the new revelation is the *Atharva Veda* and the six philosophical systems (*khaṭ darśan*) are no more valid. Kunti and Draupadi also come to meet the Lord and have his *didār*. Then again Buddha explains who is a true Brahmin and a true Yogi in the present cosmic era. He also declares that the true believers must hide themselves. The Pandavas then wish to know how they can obtain salvation. Buddha tells them to go to the Himalayas, before reaching paradise (referred to simultaneously as *vaikuṇṭha*, Vishnu's heaven, and *Amarpurī*, in the Nizari terminology). Asked by the five brothers which is the new and true religion of *kali yuga*, the divine avatar proceeds to the description of the basic principles of the Nizari Satpanth. In our era the only pilgrimage center is the *gat* (the holy assembly of the faithful), the day for fasting is each Friday of the *bīj* or second day of the bright half of the Hindu month, the new *jāp* must be pronounced while sitting with one's face towards the West (the direction of Mecca, Karbala and Iran, former residence of the living Imam). After this description the Lord announces that during this evil age he will no more be visible to the Pandavas but will be hidden in a few places: he will be the tenth *avatār*, Ali and his subsequent manifestations in Iran (Daylam and Kahek, historical residences of the Nizari Imam, are mentioned), but also in Iraq. He will be also represented as Gur Brahma by Pir Sadruddin in Jambudvip (the Subcontinent) or Imam Shah (in the Imamshahi sectarian version of the ninth *avatār*), and eventually in the holy assembly, in the heart of all faithfull.

Gupt Panth

In the next episode Buddha adds that, before retiring to the Himalayas, the Pandavas must eat with him in order to obtain liberation. The brothers, Kunti and Draupadi accept and, of course the people who come to learn about it, are deeply shocked: how did these noble Kshatryas ever consent to dine with an impure leper and a *caṇḍāla*? This "revolutionary" act is followed by another still more shocking deed – at least according to the Brahmanical standard: the Pandavas are asked to

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sacrifice a cow. Kamdhenu, the mythical cow, immediately descends from heaven and is slaughtered. Buddha explains that in this world Brahmins and cows are worshipped whereas *caṇḍālas* are killed. Therefore this new form of sacrifice will help them to be absolved from their sins. The holy cow is then dismembered and its parts are distributed among the Pandavas. Kunti takes the skin, Yudhisthira the head, and the remaining brothers, the four legs. Subsequently, all of them walk into the city with the torn parts of the sacrificed animal. At first, the inhabitants of Hasthinapura are horrified, but as the blood trickles and falls on the earth it changes into diamonds and rubies, and Kunti's dress becomes luminous (*nurānī*). Eventually, people understand that a miracle has taken place and that the Pandavas are not guilty. Sadruddin's text mentions the fact that in this way the old taboo of the sacred cow comes to an end. The Imamshahi Buddha Avatar has a note specifiying that in older times, according to the *Yajur Veda* (some fragments of which are quoted), the custom of *gaumedha yagya*[13] was prevalent. After the sacrifice the Pandavas finally go the Himalayas, as ordered by the Lord.

In the following episode Ganga (the deified Ganges) and the 68 centres of pilgrimage (*arsaṭh tīrthas*) come to see Buddha and complain about the fact that he will not be manifested during the *Kali yuga* which has just come: so how can they live without his presence? The ninth *avatār* answers that he will be hidden in the form of the tenth incarnation, and his representative, Guru Brahma, will appear in Jambudvipa in the form of Pir Hasan Kabiruddin (in the Imamshahi version of his son Imam Shah), while he himself will be always present in the heart of his devotees. During the new cosmic age the holy places of pilgrimages will have no more value, but if they remain as they are and are faithful to the Lord nothing bad will happen to them. Then come the *Bhūtas* and *Bhairavas* (symbolising here the belief in ghosts, spirits, and so forth) who complain in the same way. Buddha answers that only the ignorant and heedless ones (*gafal*), those who know nothing of the advent of Nikalank Avatar, the tenth manifestation will worship them. Therefore the spirits should go to the places of pilgrimage and remain there to be worshipped by superstitious devotees whom they will deceive. But once more, no harm will be done to them. The *Bhūtas* and *Bhairavas* are

[13] This is to be found in one Imamshahi versions of the *Das Avatar*, see Khaki (1978, pp.: 348–349). Also see, in the same publication, the interesting attempt to link Krishna's lineage to the Prophet Muhammad's family, pp. 373–376. This is a prominent motif in the Imamshahi tradition. See note 17 below.

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followed by the *patthar-pattrī* (litt. stones, here images, idols) to which more or less the same discourse is made. They declare to the Lord that those who worship them, together with the spirits commit a sin. Here the Imamshahi version has a footnote with a reference to a Puranic text which explains that those who worship stones or wooden idols as Ishvar will go to hell.[14]

The last fragment is devoted to a lengthy description of Nikalank Avatar, the tenth Manifestation (Ali and all the following Imams of our age), the Pirs, the future incarnations of the Pandavas, Kunti and Draupadi on the earth, and the events which will take place at the end of the *kali yuga*, in the same style as the prophetic *gināns* and *Āgam vāṇīs* (Khan, 1997b; Khan and Moir, 2000).

The text entitled *Pandvon no parab* is very similar in contents to both Sadruddin's and Imam Shah's *Buddha Avatars*. However, while it does not contain the fragment on pilgrimage places, spirits and idols, it gives a kind of moral fable on the fate which awaits those who fall prey to greed and dishonesty. For instance, there is a story is about a golden brick and travellers wandering in a forest. This is followed by a digression on the inevitability of the Mahabharata war which concludes the *ginān* with the signature of Imam Shah.

PERCEPTION OF THE BUDDHA FIGURE IN THE SOUTH ASIAN NIZARI TRADITION

We can now attempt to analyse the stories of the Buddha Avatar, as summarized above. We will first address two major questions: what kind of message do these poems seek to convey and what have been their sources of inspiration?

To begin with, it is clear that these texts are meant exclusively for the Nizari devotees. As the Satpanthi literature has remained secret (for the purpose of *taqiyya*) roughly till the end of the last century, it is in no way conceived as an open debate or controversy with the followers of other religions. In fact it has been composed for the new converts who had recently abandoned their former beliefs and practices. The figure of the Buddha is identified with the Imam of the Nizaris and his personality is made to fit into the framework of traditional Ismaili Imamology. In this way, the stress is laid on the necessity of recognizing (Gujarati: *olakhvu*) this eternal manifestation of Divine Light. "Recognizing the Lord" is an essential part of the

[14] Ibid. p. 377.

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Koran, Kuran, Quran is Atharv Veda

Ismaili credo, the living Imam being the surpeme guide (*Gur Nar, Pīr śāh*), the only spiritual teacher on earth capable – and entitled – to divulgue the esoteric interpretation of the Koran referred to as *Athar* (or *Atharva*) *Veda*. Apart from this, all the main tenets of the Satpanthi Nizari religion are summed up in a clear and simple way. This seems to indicate that the texts have been composed for those who had already some basic knowledge of the tradition, and are rather intended as a reminder of the faithful's duties: for instance, payment of the obligatory tithe (*dasondh*), and regular attendance at the prayer assemblies (*gat, jamāt*, where the *ghaṭ-pāṭ* ritual is performed).

However, one must bear in mind the fact that the above mentioned elements occupy very little space in the longer versions of *Buddha Avatars*, while lenghthy fragments are devoted to other themes. Although these are parts of the Satpanthi doctrine, they convey a message which goes far beyond strictly sectarian boundaries. Among them one can mention the whole discourse on castes and the criticism levelled at image and spirit worship. But before analysing these themes, it is necessary to say a few words on the present interpretations of the Buddha figure among the Ismailis.

The *Das Avatar gināns* belong to a category of texts which has been formally banned (Rattansi, 1987: 159). However, a few Khoja authors have written short presentations of these texts, before or after this period.[15] As far as the ninth Avatar is concerned, the most striking feature is the attempt at dissociating the Buddha from the historical Shakyamuni. In older works he had already been identified with the Adam of our Era (according to one Nizari tradition there have been several Adams in different cycles of time), perceived as a prophet and an Imam.[16] For instance, one commentator says that the Ismaili Buddha is not the historical Shakyamuni, but only Adam, while another one insists that he was Adam's father, an Imam named Honayd. As far as Imamshahis are concerned, I have not come across any attempt to dissociate Buddha from his historical model, even if in the publication of the main branch of the Imamshahis the drawing printed on the frontispice shows him as a Persian warrior. In fact, his recent iconography in a booklet dealing with the *das avatārs* entitled

[15] These are unpublished works which are not intended for the general public, except the text available on the website of Heritage Society. One version of the Ismaili *Buddha avatar* has been entirely translated into French.

[16] It may be interesting to mention here the legendary Adam's peak in Ceylon (Sri Lanka) where the sacred footprint of Adam, worshipped by the Muslims, is regarded as a mark of the Buddha's foot by the Singhalese.

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Harivansh, published by the Athia branch of this sect, is a conventional representation of Shakyamuni.[17]

We have to remember, at this juncture, that the *Buddha Avatar* poem is a part of the larger Das Avatar *ginān*, even when it is published separately; it must therefore be considered in this light. Older Khoja *gināns*, such as Sadruddin's *Dua* and *Gayatri*, as well as similar Imamshahi compositions, give different lines of Imams from earlier *kalpas* onwards, all of them identified with Hindu incarnations known or unknown in Brahmanical tradition. Indeed one should remark once more that many names mentioned in these lists do not coincide with Hindu mythological figures, except in our present *kalpa* where these are mostly the familiar Vishnu's avatars. After the ninth manifestation, the line is said to merge into the line of Ali's forefathers, Ali himself and his descendants. Among Ali's ancestors figure the hidden Imams who were companions to the earlier biblical prophets from Adam onwards.[18] Ultimately, the tenth incarnation, or the last Imam of the present cycle will be also from the Prophet's family. It is obvious that one of the major concerns of Satpanthi Pirs had been to link Vishnu's avatars to the Biblical Imams, in so far as the sacred genealogy was to be recited by the faithful, as an uninterrupted line of Imams. In other words it was crucial to associate the

[17] On the Imamshahi Sapanthi tradition see Khan and Moir (1999).

[18] In the Imamshahi tradition (at least in early twentieth century publications of Ahmad Ali Khaki who claims to be the only legitimate *sajjadā-nishīn* of the Pirana shrine where Imam Shah is buried) there is another attempt to connect Vishnu's avatars to the Prophets's family: Muhammad and Ali are said to be the descendants of Anirudha, Krishna's son who would have run away to *arab deś* and settle there... Here, the Buddha *avatār* has evidently no role to play and is entirely omitted. Khaki who accepts (or even proposes?) this theory but also publishes the whole Buddha avatar and stresses its importance, tries to make up for the inconsistency in asserting that Buddha was but another form of Krishna and that it is why he appears immediately after him, without any transition, contrary to the other avatars who descend one from one another. The Khoja and Imamsahi *duas* and *gavantris* give (with few variants) the following line of Imams after Krishna: Parikshit, Janmajeya (two familiar mythological figures), Sesanad, Satanad, Savasthan, Budhasthan, Bin Vachraj, Sri Budha, followed by Sish (Seth) etc. (this list I taken from Pir Sadruddin's *Gavantri*). According to an older, Fatimid Ismaili tradition (Marquet Ibid.: 231–232), Adam was a Prophet of the first millenium of one cycle, and Abel having been killed, Sish (Seth) became the *asas* (Imam) in the following millenium, the prophet was Noah and the Imam Sem, then Abraham's *asas* was Ismael and Isaac the Imam; Moses being the Prophet, Aaron was the hidden Imam, whilst Jesus, as a prophet had Simon as the Imam (see also Daftary, Ibid.: 139). During the Persian Nizari period, the following series of Imams is found: Malik Shulim, Malik Yazdaq, Malik al-Salam (all three corresponding to the biblical Melchizedec), then du'l-Qarnayin (Khidr), Ma'ad and Ali.(Ibid.:394).

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former Fatimid and Persian Nizari theories with the new patterns conceived for South Asian devotees. The major difficulty which the Ismaili preachers had to overcome arose from the doctrinal difference which existed between the concept of avatars in Hinduism and Ismaili imamology. Besides, the Vaishnava incarnations are not related by descent, whereas all the Imams must necessarily belong to the same lineage. Although these family links have been provided in the *duas, gayatris* and similar texts, the tradition fails to explain the transition from Krishna to Buddha in the Dasavatar compositions. Sadruddin's *dua*, for instance, gives a genealogy which includes at least seven names between Krishna and Buddha. This genealogy is reproduced with a few variants in other *gināns* of the same type both in the Khoja and in the Imamshahi tradition.

Be that as it may, the continuity of the sacred lineage was more important than the identification with any specific figure. Considering that the former eight incarnations were unambiguously identified with Vishnu's famous ten descents, there is no reason to doubt that the Ismaili Buddha could be equated with Shakyamuni himself, once integrated into the Vaishnava pantheon as the ninth avatar. This hypothesis can be easily confirmed by refering to a number of important features which characterize the figure of Buddha as perceived by the Satpanthis. One can thus surmise that the attempts, made by some authors, to dissociate the Ismaili Buddha from the Buddhist/Hindu one, is but a recent development and must be understood as a part of the scheme aiming at gradually eradicating all South-Asian, indigenous influences.[19]

LITERARY, MYTHICAL AND HISTORICAL LINKS: NEW CULTURAL CONSTRUCTIONS

Considering that the Satpanthi Buddha is an integral part of the *Das Avatar* ginanic genre, one may now ask the following question: what kind of texts existed in Hindu literature on the same subject? It is a well-known fact that, from a certain period onwards, the avatar theory became so popular in Vaishnava *bhakti,* that apart from the mention in various Puranas and similar texts (Kane, Ibid.: 720–723), it was used as a distinct motive in poetry. For instance, the twelfth

[19] There still are interesting debates in the Khoja community concerning the role and place of the so called "Hindu" elements in the sacred literature. I am indebted to Iqbal Surani for providing me with some important data on this subject. See also Esmail and Asani.

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century Bengali author Jayadeva starts his famous *Gita Govinda* with a short versified composition in praise of the ten avatars, and this is probably the best-known example. But it seems that, as far as longer poems of the epic type are concerned, Kshemendra's *Dashavatarcharita* (eleventh century) constitutes a rare, if not a unique case.[20] It was most probably composed during the eleventh century. Actually, the work of the Kashmiri poet appears as the closest model for the Ismaili *Das Avatar,* even if the latter was probably written much later. Before examining the important issue of dates, let us proceed to a brief comparison of both texts.

As in Kshemendra's poem, in the Ismaili ginan a long, separate, versified chapter is devoted to each incarnation in particular, starting from the Fish avatar (*matsya*) and ending with Kalki. Much more, the story of the first eight avatars is practically the same in both works, if one excepts, of course, a few "sectarian" interopolations introduced by the Nizari authors. These passages are supposed to introduce the Satpanthi ideas – one could even say to "infiltrate" them into the original message – in order to explain to the new converts that the earlier incarnations of Vishnu have been in reality hidden manifestations of the Imam. It is with the description of the ninth incarnation that a conspicuous difference is felt. But this is consistent with the Ismaili theory, according to which in the Kali yuga the succession goes to Imams of Perso-Arabic descent.

Before deciding if the Sanskrit author's famous composition may have served at least, partially, as a source of inspiration to the Ismaili preachers, let us first see how the poet Kshemendra perceives the figure of Buddha. It is very different from the vision of some other "orthodox" authors who, in order to account for the anti-vedic, anti-brahmanical stand of Shakyamuni, imagined the following theory: according to this theory the Buddha preached his message to deceive the Asuras and, by attracting them into his orbit, diverted the enemies of the *devas* from the true *dharma*. (Dowson, 1991: 38). Instead, the Kashmiri poet Kshemendra who, according to a few commentators, was himself a Brahman acting as a religious teacher at the court of the local king, views the Buddha as the ideal world renouncer. He was supposed to be the perfect ascetic whose role was to

[20] I wish to thank Monika Boehm-Tettelbach who supplied me with the pages of various catalogues of Sanskrit works on the *das avatar* theme, such as the *Catalogue of the India Office Library,* by Pran Natha and J.B. Chaudhuri, London, 1938. Most of the texts listed in these catalogues are entitled *Dasavatara stava* or *Dashavatara stotra* and are very short.

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open the eyes of the people on the instability of all things and the illusory nature of the material universe, encouraging them to strive towards the ultimate goal of liberation (*mokṣa*). At no point does Kshemendra mention the *asuras* nor the hostility of Shakyamuni towards the Vedic revelation and the Brahmanical *varṇāśrama* order. The story, in fact, closely follows the Buddhist canonical version – apart from a short introduction where it is said that the Kali yuga has come and that Vishnu has to take another *avatār* to protect his devotees. It starts with the miraculous birth of the Buddha, mentions the four encounters, the departure to the forest, the attack of Mara, the illumination, and finally his teaching. It finishes with a confrontation between Siddhadhartha's grieved and shocked father, who after much arguing, eventually understands the greatness of his son and becomes reconciled with his fate.

The religion preached by Kshemendra's Buddha is simply referred to by the Sanskrit word *saddharma* (litt. good law, true *dharma*), one of the terms that were used by both Buddhists and Jains. Besides, the Kashmiri poet is said to have composed another work on Buddhist, the *Avddana Kalpalata* (Vajpayee, 1989: 17,23). All this has induced some commentators to believe that the Kashmiri poet had been a Buddhist before converting to the Vaishnava creed. However Vajapyee asserts that he was initially a Shaiva who adopted the Vaishnava faith under the influence of Sompadacharaya (ibid.: 21).

Therefore, in the same way as the Hindu author had integrated the figure of Shakyamuni into the Vaishnava pantheon by removing the undesirable elements (critiscim of the Vedas, of the *Varṇa* system and of the Brahmans), the Nizari preachers of the Subcontinent incorporated this Buddha into their revised Satpanthi Imamology. As we have seen an important part of the process was his inclusion in the ten avatars. In this way, they also reconstructed the story of Shakyamuni to fit their own doctrinal requirements. True, one dose not find any of the familiar hagiographical episodes present in canonical Buddhism as well as in Kshemendra's work. However, surprisingly enough, some of the features which had been purposedly suppressed by the Kashmiri poet to fit the Brahmanical Vaishnava ideology have been reintroduced by the authors of the Ismaili *Buddha Avatars*.

Among these elements one has to mention the whole discourse on castes, the uselessness of sacrifice – all consistent with the Buddhist doctrine, in other words with the *saddharma* – a denomination which

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may have inspired the Nizaris to rename the Subcontinental variant of Ismailism as *sat panth* (Satpanth) or *sat dharm*.

Nevertheless, the portrayal of the Buddha in Ismaili tradition conspicuously differs from Kshemendra's description, and one could think that the *Dashavatarcharitam* has not at all have served as a model. Another argument against my hypothesis would be that this type of Satpanthi *ginān,* in style as well as in contents, has a decidely popular flavour and is more akin to folk poetry than to classical literature. It has also been suggested that the indigenous models resorted to by the Nizari authors originate from oral, folk religion, rather than from a "higher" brahmanical heritage. Even the prominent Epic themes, drawn from the *Mahabharata* seem to be more inspired by its folk variants which have been and are still popular all over India.

However, there are other important elements which tend to indicate that Kshemendra's work may have been behind the Ismaili representation of the Buddha. First of all, I do not know of any popular, oral or written folk version of a long *Dasavatar* poem (which of course does not mean there is none), secondly in the ginanic literature one finds texts where the classical, Sanskrit form has been, albeit awkwardly, imitated. Interesting and relevant examples would be some texts entitled *Gayatris,* as well as a *ginān* entitled *Athar Ved* and attributed to Pir Sadruddin. In this latter composition (written in a mixture of Gujarati, Hindi and other North Indian vernaculars) most nouns end in *-am,* such as *Narāyanam, vicāram* etc. and third person plural verbs in *-ante,* such as ā*randhante, lābhiante* and so forth. This somewhat artificial "Sanskritisation" of words was probably intended to give a particular prestige to the recitation of Ismaili religious texts which thus imitated Hindu mantras. Although they would not have sounded convicing to learned Brahmins, who would rather have been shocked if they had known them, they could probably impress the low caste communities. Having no access to the Vedas and their commentaries, they had but a vague idea of Sanskrit and Brahmanical culture, but could nonenethess have admired this model of learning. This is still the case among many lower castes in modem India (Khan, 1997a). One may therefore conclude that imitating Sanskrit models, like other indigenous patterns, was part of the "strategy" of the Nizari preachers of the Subcontinent and was aimed at proving the universality of their message.

It may not be a coincidence to find that Kshemendra is also the author of a versified manuel of conduct entitle *Charucharyashataka*,

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containing hundred principles, very much like the Nizari Ismaili ginan entitled *So Kiriya*. It remains to see if that such collections of hundred verses were common in medieval Indian literature.

Another important issue must be now examined: how old is the *Dasavatar ginans*? Unfortunately, as for the rest of the ginanic literature, we can at present only speculate on the matter. It is generally assumed (Shackle and Moir, 1992: 15–16) that the substratum is as old as the mission itself, although most manuscripts are said to have been written from the eighteenth century onwards. Older manuscripts may have existed, but there were probably rare, and one can only surmise that the bulk of the Satpanthi tradition was oral, probably due to its secretive character originating from the necessity of religious dissimulation (*taqiyya*). The decision to transcribe hundreds of *ginān*s certainly corresponds to a change in the community. It may also have coincided with more general changes in Indian society: the revival of Sanskrit culture, the attempt at transcribing oral literature and giving it a higher status, the integration of popular cults into the mainstram and the attempts at transforming them to fit the requirements of a higher, court and brahmanical culture.

This does make sense, even if we must admit that the *Dasvatar* and the *Buddha avatar* are relatively recent creations. The Satpanthi authors would have then been following this movement in trying to imitate some popular models belonging to classical religious literature which, by the eighteenth century, would have become more prestigious and better known to the masses.

It remains for us to examine the perception and the role of the Buddha Avatar, for the present Nizari Khoja and Imamshahi communities in India and abroad.

CONTEMPORARY PERCEPTIONS OF THE BUDDHA AVATAR

Let us first examine the changes that were decided among the Nizari 'mainstream' communities by the World Ismailia Assocations in 1975 (Rattansi, 1987: 157). During the conference that was held in Paris and chaired by the Aga Khan a resolution was passed regarding the classification of the *ginān*s into three categories: the first, unproblematic one, referred to the texts that did not contain 'Hindu elements' and which were to continue to be recited as such in the *jamāt-khanas*, the prayer halls of the Nizari Ismailis. The second category comprised the hymns that included a

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few Hindu terms. It was decided to replace these words by their Islamic equivalents: in this way 'Hari' became 'Ali', 'Gur', 'Pir' etc. As for the third category, which had 'excessive Hindu elements' such as the famous *Das avatar,* they were simply banned (Ibid: 157–159).

The consequence is that, at present, many young Ismailis have no idea of the existence of similar texts. I remember a young man asserting, a little agressively, that the Nizari religion was absolutelty similar to Sufism, apart from the central role played by the Imams. I was however, lucky enough to meet his father with whom I had a long discussion. Mr. Mackwani's knowledge was of a very different type.[21] Not only did he remember by heart a number of the officially "banned" *gināns* but he declared that his father had told him in detail the story of the Buddha *avatār*. This poem was, he said, of particular importance to the South Asian Ismaili community – in as much as it portrayed the first manifestation in the Arabo-Persian garb and stressed the futility of caste distinctions. When I asked if he identified the Nizari Buddha with the historical one, he replied that they were the same with a small difference: in the Ismaili tradition, each *mahzar* had also sub-manifestations or *upāvatārs*. The Buddha *avatār* which was the central character of the Ismaili *ginān* was a sub-manifestation which preceded the saint whom we call the "historical Buddha", Siddhartha Gautama, the Shakyamuni. In this way he could explain the different form in which this Buddha appeared and also account for the fact that all the Ismaili avatars descended from each other.

My research into the Imamshahi branch of Ismailism (Khan and Moir, 1999; Khan, forthcoming) led me to another interesting discovery. A leader of one of the branches of the complex religious movement referred to as Athia, declared that the figure of the Buddha was of utmost importance in their tradition. He gave me a small booklet entitled *Harivansh* which contained a summary of the "Ismailized" avatars with particular reference to the ninth one.[22]

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[21] I would like to express my gratitude to Nizar Mackwanie (Paris) who generously shared with me his knowledge of the Nizari Ismailil tradition of South Asia.

[22] Contrary to the so- called "main branch" which is undergoing an unprecedented crisis (Khan and Moir, 1999), the Athias have been able to preserve their unity while continuing with the former traditions. Instead, one of the leaders of the main branch has asserted the original Hindu nature of the lmamshahi Satpanthi religion and undertaken to modify the *gināns* in a way which is exactly opposite to the decision taken by the Ismailiya Association in Paris. As a result the powerful Dasavatar theme has remained, but its Islamic connection has been entirely uprooted... See Khan, forthcoming.

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A last question remains to be answered before concluding. Is the ban which affects the *Dasavatar* and similar *gināns* reflecting the real practices of contemporay Nizari Ismailis? Actually, even a superficial investigation will show that it is not so. Firstly, the decision of the Ismailiya Association referred to above is more a recommendation that a real ban. Secondly, if the "old *gināns*" survive in the memory of the older generations (now above 60 years of age), they also continue to be recited in many *jamāt-khanas* all over the world.[23] Recent publications released by the Institute of Ismaili Studies (London), far from avoiding this ginanic theme, make ample references to it.[24] Finally, a few groups and associations, such as the Heritage Society in Canada,[25] are working to preserve parts of the Ismaili literary legacy that are endangered by present circumstances. It is obvious that not only South Asia, but the whole world, is caught in violent conflicts that appear as communal, although they result from complex social and political factors.

In this context, it may be relevant to remember the Buddha in his various "avatars", whether Buddhist, Hindu or Muslim...

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[23] I am grateful to Iqbal Surani who generously shared with me his knowledge of contemporay Nizari Ismaili communities in France, England and Madagascar.

[24] See Esmail and Asani, as listed in the references.

[25] The publications of this Association are available on the website. The French translation of the *Buddha Avatar* preceded by an interesting introduction was very useful while I was preparing this paper.

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